

# Didacticism and teaching in animal literature and charlotte's web



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Since the birth of Aesop's Fables, originating over two thousand years ago, "animal literature" has been used as a teaching tool. That is, when a certain piece of literature centers on an animal, there is usually a certain moral, emotional, or ethical lesson to be learned. The method varies, as sometimes the animal exists realistically and other times the animal is anthropomorphic and teaches directly through words. Using animals as a teaching tool is necessary in many regards, because they act as symbols and totems for our real life morals and teach these in such a way that human characters could not.

In *Charlotte's Web*, the titular Charlotte is a spider who uses her worldly knowledge to help Wilbur the pig through his life (and at times, save it). Her position as a motherly, knowledgeable figure is unlike many other animal stories, though - she does not teach through her experiences in the novel but rather directly through words. She already has the knowledge necessary to aide Wilbur and speak of the complexities of life. She acts as his first real companion and teaches him about life and the nature of spiders, as only a spider could do, in addition to establishing her credibility and intelligence. She says, "I have to say what is true. I am not entirely happy about my diet of flies and bugs, but it's the way I'm made... Way back for thousands and thousands of years we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs" (White 39). Her use of "we" to refer to the family of spiders indicates the close relationship she has with her own kind. This establishes Charlotte as a trustworthy teacher and member of the spider species, especially since the first thing she says is "I have to say what is true," telling us directly that what she says is believable. Charlotte's position as a trustworthy and friendly

character is necessary framework for her teachings later, as we now know that her philosophical statements later are founded on an intelligent background. A reader, particularly a younger one in the target audience for this novel, would likely be impressed at the cleverness Charlotte exhibits given her living habits and would be interested in her ideas later on.

Charlotte also asserts her intelligence in saying “ I live by my wits. I have to be sharp and clever, lest I go hungry” (40). We learn that through her very nature, Charlotte is a witty character able to make claims that we can believe or at least consider to be true. Her ensuing explanation of how her eating habits help save the world around her from being infested with bugs (40) as well as her later mention of activities at the Queensborough Bridge (60) reinforce that Charlotte has a strong worldly background and knowledge that extends far beyond the limited realm of the barn in which she lives.

When Wilbur that he is to be killed for Christmas meat, the ensuing panic leads him to call his only close friend for help. It is not possible for a human to stand in for an animal in this position, of course; only an animal can help him since the humans (the enemy to him at this point) are in it together to have him eaten. Only Fern, the girl, may be considered an ally, yet she transcends the human group because she can talk to the animals, and thus from the beginning is the only human that does not side with their reasoning or desires. For the second time in the novel, now, Wilbur must be saved. Both times, he is saved by a transcendent figure: Fern, the girl who can talk to animals, and now Charlotte, the animal who can communicate with humans through web writing (80).

The animals' discussions parallel human concerns and desires, so when Charlotte speaks to Wilbur about something, the reader can understand it as the solution to the problems human pose to animals, and thus, the solution in how to act with them. She says later of Templeton's possible unwillingness to help in saving Wilbur, " I'm not sure Templeton will be willing to help. You know how he is— always looking out for himself, never thinking of the other fellow" (89). In saying this Charlotte has acknowledged multiple things at once. For one, she alludes to her own altruism in helping Wilbur, that is, " thinking of the other fellow," but also to Templeton the rat who has not done so. She criticizes people here who do not consider the wants of " the other fellow" (animals) and act selfishly. She further criticizes humans in other areas, such as arguing against the nature of their fast-paced busy lives (60). Again, a reader may be inclined to see Charlotte's views on people as a reflection of someone who has experienced it that way: someone who lives day in and day out in a rush, or with folks who are inconsiderate, would certainly have a more informed opinion on these matters. A spider, who lives calmly and outside of the bustling human life, offers a view outside the realm of human existence that allows us to reflect on ourselves and question our own lives. Charlotte's commentary could only be done by a country animal outside of the busy and inconsiderate humans' lives.

In addition, Charlotte has firm opinions on the concepts of life and death. Her opinions are quite philosophical; at one point she says " after all, what's a life anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows

anyone's life can stand a little of that" (164). Charlotte's vast knowledge and clever wit are less significant than the friendship she has with a pig.

Charlotte is saying that companionship and friendship are the most important things to cherish in lieu of intelligence or other endeavors. As an animal with a short life and repetitive lifestyle, the friendship she has with Wilbur is the most important thing to her. So, in our short lives (according to Charlotte, the length of any life is just " a little") it is most important to find friends to spend the life we have with. Wilbur then takes this advice and quickly befriends three of Charlotte's daughters after she has died (182).

Although it may seem counterintuitive to trust a spider's advice on providing answers to deep questions like " What is most important in my life?," it actually in this case makes sense. Charlotte's realm of experience is huge, somehow, yet her existence is short and limited only to the barn in which she lives. For many of us, we have a breadth of knowledge that expands far beyond where we live, yet we do not have a chance to experience the entirety of that knowledge. Charlotte says, " do you know how long it took men to build [the Queensborough Bridge]? Eight whole years. My goodness, I would have starved to death waiting that long" (60). She goes on to discuss her own lifestyle and her content nature in not going out to explore everything, giving her more time to think and reflect on life. Perhaps Charlotte is not advocating that everyone do the same, but that they consider taking a moment to " take in" life.

So, why Charlotte? Why use any animal as a teacher of morals? Marianne Dekoven's " Why Animals Now?" mentions that " only from the point of view of the human are other animals nonhuman" (Dekoven 363). This describes <https://assignbuster.com/didacticism-and-teaching-in-animal-literature-and-charlottes-web/>

the character of Fern quite well, as she can act as both the human and animal, able to speak with both. She can see the animals as humans and through the eyes of Fern (a child) we see Charlotte and the other characters as possessing human consciousness. Dekoven goes on to mention a “massive interdependence between humans and other animals” (366) which implies our own need for animals both practically and as a tool to understand ourselves. These animals can be used, she argues, more specifically for political intentions or otherwise (366-7) although it is more apparent in works like White’s that animals play a more metaphorical or otherwise symbolic role that could not be fulfilled by humans, or is more aptly fulfilled by a fitting animal.

Additional studies have discussed animal fables more specifically, including Aesop’s short moralistic stories. Although longer novels and stories can serve a similar function, Jill Mann writes in her book *From Aesop to Reynard* that there is “an overlap of the human and the animal world; the animals are seen as having human characteristics although they lack a human complexity” (Mann 30). This view is not applicable to *Charlotte’s Web*, where the animals certainly have both human complexity and relationships. Thus Mann may not classify this book as a fable, but rather an extended allegory for life. The animal character of Charlotte is not the same as the animals in fables, who exist possess no context, being only what they are outlined as their animal characters define them. Charlotte does not conform to a pre-existing “spider” outline; she fills another role entirely, using real spider characteristics (web-weaving, bug-catching, etc.) to defend the character traits she creates for herself. This bolsters her teachings and lessons more

because she has created a believable, deep character for herself that escapes the flatness of the common fables. In both cases, the didactic element is present, but rather than relying on what Mann calls an “essential character,” (31) White creates a new set of “characters” for us to experience as readers, creating a more meaningful relationship that does not rely on previous foundations or assumptions. Thus within the realm of *Charlotte’s Web*, we only need to be self-referential, as Charlotte provides all the necessary evidence we need to believe she possesses the ethos to make the claims and convey the messages she does for us.

While *Charlotte’s Web* may teach in a way unlike animal fables traditionally do, it is specifically the character of Charlotte as a humanlike animal that teaches the lessons a human could not. Her traits and breadth of experience give us reason to accept her teachings, which make sense in the context of the novel. Her reason and wit allow us to believe her. In the greater context of animal fiction, it is not presupposed assumptions that we must rely on, as Mann argues, but rather a relationship that is meaningfully established and defended. Dekoven’s commentary on how animals, especially in fiction, have developed a dependent relationship with humans refers back to this. We understand animals, those who are anthropomorphic, as an extension of the human world. So when the animals in *Charlotte’s Web* specifically teach us something, we can accept it because they as symbols, and not true animals, reflect ideals and morals we understand more effectively.